

Road Map Reviews

De Niro's Bistro

by Lisa Louise Santonato

Salli Pateman - Creative Genius and Proprietor
Travis Williams - Mr. Delicious Chef
Paul Sundher - Fabulous Bartender
Richard Moncion - Painter of stunning erotica

What do Robert De Niro and Ayn Rand have in common? A flare for the extreme, stylized by Salli Pateman, proprietor of De Niro's Bistro. Newly renovated and relocated to 1039 Mainland Street in Yaletown, this restaurant-cum-nightclub aesthetically combines the hard-hitting edge of Robert De Niro (for which the establishment is named) and the innovative style of Rand's "The Fountainhead". Between the funky plush vinyl booths, high-backed for maximum privacy, and the impressive selection of martinis - some of which are named after the novel's charismatic personalities - the state-of-the-art bistro impresses while it charms.

If Tom Waits' "Nighthawks at the Diner" were the theme song for their old location, then (according to Paul Sundher, De Niro's bartender) the new location is most surely governed by Stevie Wonder's "Superstitious". I couldn't agree more. Ever since De Niro's moved into their new location and expanded their menu, I've been working out the nighthawk in me, and going for gold. I won't visit De Niro's unless I'm in the right mood (which is becoming increasingly familiar), and most definitely if I'm seeking a little after dinner pick-me up.

With seven different varieties to choose from, De Niro's martinis are served in those super stylin' bubble-jet glasses. I love the Dominique. Her subtle hint of lemony sweetness adds a certain dynamic presence to my evening, with or without the full meal. Other popular martinis include the Mattress (sorry, but this one tastes kind of like I'd imagine a mattress would taste) and the Romulin (lots of melon liqueur).

As for the menu, my favourite dish has also changed with the new location. My first turn-on to De Niro's was the Crazy Eggs, a delightful creamy concoction complemented by the best home fries in Vancouver, but I have decidedly switched to the roasted chicken breasts, marinated in a delicious lemon pepper and cilantro sauce. The light smattering of fresh cilantro coupled with lime juice over chicken creates a delightful, mouth watering event - that goes very well with the Dominique, I might add. Two tender chunks of chicken breast sit on a bed of creamy mashed potatoes while lightly sauteed red peppers, baby carrots, zucchini and broccoli look and taste beautiful by their side.

What is it that makes De Niro's my new favourite spot? As delicious as the food is, and as much as I love a good martini, there is certainly more that compels me to return again and again. Is it the lighting? Red table lampshades create a fiery warm glow that mixes well with the ultramarine blue high-backed Kings' booths, which allow for great foreplay for your nineties-style rendezvous.

I asked Salli about the decision to go with booths of such gigantic proportions. Other than a photo she saw from a swanky Florida club called Delano's, she tells me "In the old place everybody was just kind of crammed in, and I said with this one, we're gonna go the opposite and we're gonna make everything really big."

Paul Sundher, resident bartender and longtime friend adds: "I just kind of chalk it up to Salli being a creative genius in certain ways."

At night, De Niro's takes on a sort of deep bluey-red haze that's perfect for the pre-millennial, jet-set Vancouverite. Although Ayn Rand and Robert De Niro are the precursors to the bistro's flare for the extreme, De Niro's still makes me feel more like a character in Coupland's latest novel. Forward-thinking style meets retro cool for a moderately paced evening.

In my opinion, De Niro's best and most unique feature is the word "nerd", hung above the bar in great neon letters.

As the story goes, Salli discovered the letters sitting on the floor of a studio. She had arrived to pick up the paintings by Richard Moncion, and discovered more than she had bargained for. Out of a collection of various letters, she picked out the D and the E and the N and the R, and was hoping some day she'd find the I, the O and the S, to spell De Niro's, of course. In the meantime, the letters were combined to spell the only word they could find, which was NERD, and took up its resident position over the bar.

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"We believe the letters may have come from Budweiser," says Paul. "But here's the tongue twister. There's no 'n' in Budweiser. Where do you think that came from?" Hmm... I wonder.

Salli tells me, "It's a bit of a controversy, some really people like it, some people don't."

Paul adds, "Yeah, you know when it first went up I thought - uh - it's too bright, but now, I've totally grown accustomed to it."

Salli loves the effect. "Everyone looks tanned and healthy. Everyone looks like a star!"

Nerd or no nerd, De Niro's utterly fulfills my every desire for a venue that deals style, charm, presence and personality, mixed with a super staff and clientele. In its complete lack of reservation for wanting to serve up the ultimate in everything, De Niro's doesn't disappoint. So far, this is the best place to be in Vancouver for the turn of the century. Dominique would love it, too, I am sure.

De Niro's Bistro is open from 11:30 am to midnight weekdays, and later on weekends. Dinner ranges from \$15 to \$75. 1039 Mainland St., 684-2777.